

[Wall Street Journal](#) – March 8, 2010

By JOHN D. MCKINNON and JARED FAVOLE

WASHINGTON — Some House Democrats wavering over whether to back a health-care overhaul questioned whether it would effectively curb the country's health costs, highlighting a difficult issue that the White House and congressional leaders must address in the final negotiations on the measure.

The issue is one of several that have been raised by Democrats over the bill, which President Barack Obama and Democratic leaders are pushing to pass by the end of March. Conservative Democrats have raised questions over the bill's language on abortion and tax increases, while liberals are unhappy with its failure to include a government plan that would compete with private insurers.

On Sunday, two Democrats who hold swing votes said they were focusing on how much money the overhaul would actually save, both for employers and insured workers, and for the federal government. The House and Senate have passed competing bills, and leaders now are putting together a compromise version. Details on cost savings are still being worked out.

"If the House and Senate can't work out cost containment, I don't see how I could support a bill that doesn't help our business community," Rep. John Adler (D., N.J.) said on "Fox News Sunday." "I'm not sure we've gone far enough in terms of fixing the underlying system to make it affordable for businesses and taxpayers."

Rep. Jason Altmire (D., Pa.), also appearing on Fox, said he needed "to see a much clearer picture of the cost containment." He suggested strengthening provisions in the bill aimed at shifting the way providers are reimbursed, to be based on quality of care rather than the number of procedures performed. Critics say the government's current fee-for-service reimbursement system within its Medicare program encourages providers to offer patients unnecessary procedures.

Democrats backing a health overhaul have cited cost containment as a main goal. But Republicans and some Democrats say the legislation doesn't do enough to address the issue, a concern that appears to be contributing to public doubts over the legislation.

Messrs. Adler and Altmire opposed the original House bill, but are now being courted by House leaders scrounging for votes to pass a new compromise plan. Despite his reservations, Mr. Altmire said on Sunday that he was also worried about the cost consequences of doing nothing.

Democratic leaders are chasing votes in both chambers, but the tougher task is in the House, where that chamber's original bill passed by only three extra votes in November. To complicate matters, Democrats are relying on a two-step process that requires the House to pass the Senate version of the bill, and then pass a separate bill that would tweak the Senate bill to address some House objections.

The approach is necessary after Democrats lost their 60-vote supermajority in the Senate,

following Republican Sen. Scott Brown's upset victory in a Massachusetts special election in January. That makes it virtually impossible for Senate Democrats to pass a compromise health-care bill under regular rules, which require 60 votes to overcome any filibusters. Instead, Democrats plan to pass the separate bill under special budget rules that require only a simple majority in the 100-member Senate.

Kathleen Sebelius, secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, urging action on the legislation in an appearance on NBC's "Meet the Press" on Sunday, cited a new report from Goldman Sachs that says profits for private-sector health insurers are rising and competition is decreasing.

She defended the health-care overhaul's approach towards bringing down costs. "There are huge delivery changes in the bill," she said on ABC News's "This Week."

These include expanding the use of health-information technology, which could help lower patient error rates and administrative overhead, and new taxes on higher-value insurance plans, which could hold down their costs and overall health-care inflation, she said.

Ms. Sebelius said that contrary to Republican charges that the legislation represented a huge, new government spending program, the proposed overhaul would reduce government health-care costs by a total of \$1 trillion in its second decade, from current projections for that period.

Republicans say many people with private insurance would still see their rates go up under the Democrats' plan. Congressional analysts project that the U.S. government is on a path to run deficits totaling about \$10 trillion in the coming decade, with more red ink to come subsequently, due in part to the rising cost of government health-care spending in entitlement programs such as Medicare - even after factoring in the proposed health-care overhaul.

"People are very, very skeptical about starting a whole new government program when we're drowning in a sea of debt," Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.) said on "This Week."